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SUBSTANCE AND STYLE OF CABINET DECISION-MAKING

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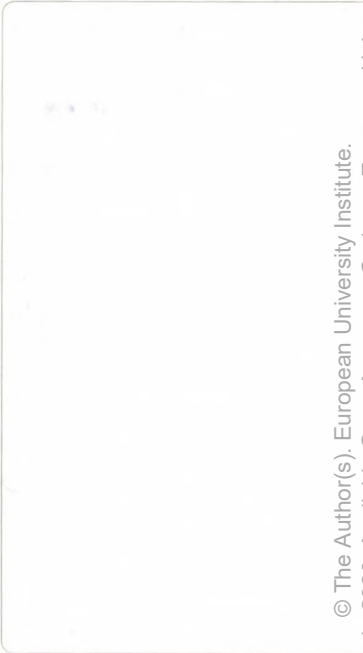
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SUBSTANCE AND STYLE OF CABINET DECISION-MAKING

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1. PROBLEM AND FRAMEWORK

The tenor of the scholarly discussion on political processes has been slowly changing over the last two decades. To the extent that the pluralist view of the state has given way to a more managerially oriented one, the interest of research and theory development has shifted from mass behaviour and representative processes towards the strategic activities of elites: "rational management of post-industrial society" is the slogan of the day.

In this perspective national governments assume their place as the focus of attention. Compared with other institutional actors they have a unique role, in so far as they are not specialized groups - the old term 'executive' is in today's circumstances most misleading. The quality and direction of national policies is above all dependent on their interests and capabilities. The government has, it is true, also other functions in the political system - ceremonial, representative and integrative - but basically it can be perceived as a purposeful decision-making system, commissioned to guide social policies. The government's job is to govern: in other words, to make major decisions of public policy, to gain acceptance for those decisions, and to direct their implementation.

But what do governments actually do when they govern a country? How do they apportion their time in this process? From where do they receive the impulses for action and what sort of factors in reality direct their agenda-building activity? To what extent are their activities directed as short-term reactions

to external stress, or - in the other extreme case - represent a serious attempt towards anticipatory, active problem-solving? Or to what extent are mere administrative routines apt to block the decision-making channel? To what kinds of strategies do cabinets resort in their interactions with the civil service, other domestic power factors and foreign governments. And finally how significant are the consequences - domestic and international - of the decisions made?

To be more precise, in this study we are essentially interested in interrelationships and covariation between the following factor complexes:

(1) Substantial centers of government activities. Are the cabinets free to select and restrict their agenda items, those issues that will be submitted to serious collective consideration? Which national questions take first priority in the ministerial time budget, which is the most visible scarce resource of modern governments.

(2) Level of significance of issues reaching the collective scrutiny of ministers. The problem may be posed crudely as follows: If it is possible to rank-order government business according to the social and political significance of issues, where is then in different policy fields the cutting off point, above which the issues reach the authoritative collective decision-making arena, whereas other issues are handled in specialized sectorial arenas, at lower levels of the cabinet system? Is it possible to classify whole policy areas along this continuum? Or is the level of decision-making determined in accordance with some other independent variable than the objective or experienced significance of an issue?

For the needs of an overall analysis the issues on the government agenda may be placed in a simple hierarchical classification:¹

(a) Routine administration: small habitual items which come up for regular review.

(b) Middle level issues: recurrent items which occur with some periodicity, but need not appear at regular intervals (budgetary process, governmental reorganization, tax reforms, social security increases or decreases and so on).

(c) New issues: policy items of more than middle level importance, typically appearing as an action or reaction of a decision-maker in a specific situation (for example, foreign policy initiatives, inflation, major disturbances in the labour market calling for government action to prevent economic damage).

(d) Strategic innovative decision-making (extensive national planning of wide policy sectors).

(3) The style of decision-making. It is not, however, enough to examine in which policy sectors or issue arenas a cabinet concentrates its activities and at which level of significance it makes policy decisions. The qualitative meaning of decisions made in different matters also varies, and there are different senses in which the government can be said to steer national policies. The decision-making style comprises here two dimensions: the strategy the government uses in approaching social problems and the relationship it has in decision-making situations with actors inside the cabinet system and political forces outside it.

Along the first dimension we can, following J.J. Richardson and his research group, discern either a striving towards active, anticipatory problem-solving, or a contentment with reactive, adaptive problem-solving. Along the latter dimension the council of ministers may take inside the cabinet system a number of alternative or parallel roles: the agenda-setting role, the policy coordination role, the policy ratification role and the policy direction role (effective collective decision-making). With regard to the attitude toward political forces outside the system, the decision-making is characterized by a bargaining style and consensus relationship in one direction, a confrontation style and imposition relationship in the other.²

The variation and interrelationships of all these factors are connected with many kinds of structural, situational and contextual factors. Figure 1 attempts to illustrate this decision-making setting in a condensed and hypothetical form.³

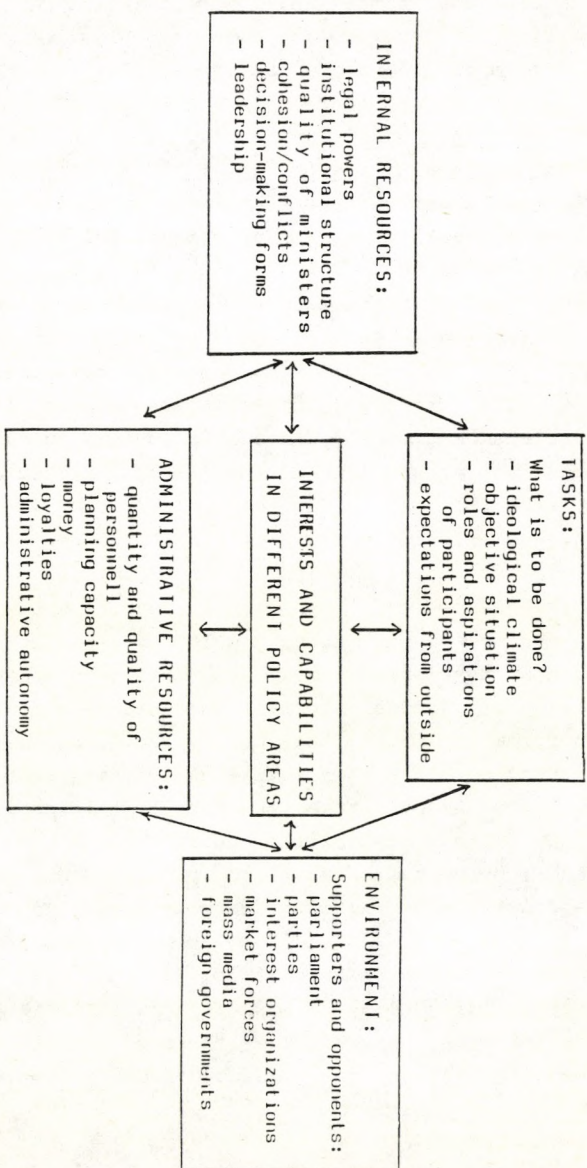


Figure 1. FACTORS AFFECTING ORIENTATIONS AND CAPABILITIES IN CABINET POLICY MAKING

Macro level investigations of economic and social policy decision-making indicate that there are differences between Western European states in the content and style of policy making. In his analysis of the economic policy of Western governments, Manfred G. Schmidt was able to differentiate between 'active' and 'passive' welfare states in the world of 1970s.⁴ And as Pekka Kosonen has clearly indicated, the four Nordic Countries - Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden - resorted in analogous situations to widely varying national strategies both in the era of economic growth and in the period of general uncertainty which followed.⁵

Explanations for these differences have been based on three different approaches. The broadest view is the national policy styles approach, which suggests that societies (governments) develop 'standard operating procedures' for making, implementing and legitimating policies and claims that it should be possible for political scientists 'to identify the main characteristics of the ways in which a given society formulates and implements its public policies'.⁶ The second view is the policy sector approach, which claims that the nature of political issues themselves defines the politics associated with them. This approach denies that there is a single policy making process at the level of the national government; instead, there tend to be numerous relatively narrow and self-contained 'policy communities' or 'issue webs' that seem to operate more or less autonomously.⁷ The third view finally is the coalition structure approach, which departs from the understanding that both the area of decision-making as well as the operating style are determined by coalition structures, party pressure on cabinet, and quality of leadership.⁸

These approaches are not necessarily contradictory. The first of them pays attention to persisting features of governmental policy, the third, for its part, to the most variable topical characteristics. The second again emphasizes the subject matter of policy making as intervening variables.

Hence, the agenda-building process, the political relevance of issues and the style of policy-making can vary depending on the political system, the type of government, and the specific policy sectors (issue arenas). Short-term and long-term situational factors could also be included in this set of

independent variables. The clarification of this complex presupposes even in the most optimal case intensive analyses, a sample of country-specific, cabinet-specific, policy-specific and situation-specific case studies. Considering the poor access to empirical data - as a result of the principle of secrecy applied by most governments - we are forced, for practical purposes, to be satisfied with much less; in short, with broad comparative interpretations on the working styles and roles of governments in national political processes.

2. POLICY-MAKING LATITUDE OF MODERN CABINETS

The primary interest of a study examining the contents of cabinet decision-making is how extensive the area of public policy covered by governmental operations is, whether some policy sectors have been separated from its sphere of competence, and how freely the collective body can select the targets of decision-making. The concept of power latitude, presented by André-Paul Frogner⁹, is used here in a somewhat modified form to include all these aspects.

The two leading functional principles of parliamentary governments are embodied in the wide range of their powers and the collective nature of decision-making. Only judicial business is for the most part excluded.

Still, the comparative analysis of governmental decision-making has to depart from the general and well-known observation, that the objects of decision-making in the large area of public policies are only minimally defined and regulated by legal norms. Old constitutions hardly mention the duties and scope of powers of governments, and even the more recent ones fail to give any systematic or comprehensive treatment of what the government is responsible for. In most cases these documents seem to have been written "in traditional language and in terms of theories and models of government that were widely accepted in the nineteenth century" - in terms of the doctrine of separation of powers.¹⁰

Thus, Paragraph 2 of the Finnish Constitution stipulates that, in addition to the President, who exercises supreme executive power - these powers are specifically enumerated - there is also a State Council, set up for the "general government

of the state". Perhaps the most rigorous and modern definition of the function of government can be found in the new Swedish Constitution: "The government governs the country. It responsible to the Riksdag". Most Western European constitutions in fact contain a definition of the government's role in the form of a general phrase: only some old monarchical systems like Belgium, the Netherlands and United Kingdom remain silent.

The most visible legal and institutional restrictions are found in semi-presidential regimes like France and Finland. In both countries the constitution reserves a number of important powers for presidential decision-making, and to a varying degree the president exercises his authority independently. In Finland the division of functions, which only partly follows the guidelines established in the constitution, was stabilized since the Second World War to the extent that it is largely independent of the party-political relationship between the president and the majority of the cabinet. Most important, according to paragraph 33 of the Constitution, the President determines Finland's relations with foreign states. As the position of the president has been strengthened, the interpretation of the legal norm has become enlarged, from mere formal decision-making to the planning of foreign policy and determining its general course. This means that the autonomy of the State Council is enormously curtailed at all levels of foreign policy agenda: it cannot appoint ambassadors, ratify trade agreements or establish plans for future strategies independently of the president.

As to the rest, the Chief of State and the government are strictly separated from each other, and the president does not have institutional means available to interfere with governmental business. In this respect the arrangement in France is evidently much more flexible: the authority to fix the agenda of cabinet meetings and to conduct the proceedings gives him the possibility of interfering decisively in its affairs. But on the other hand, in a conflict situation the president in a minority might also lose most of his real influence.

The other aspect of the question is whether the collective cabinet is capable of choosing at will the relevant issues from different policy fields and agenda levels; or is it obliged to give at any rate a formal sanction to certain kinds of decisions? Considering the formal arrangements, three main types of

governments may be distinguished in Western Europe: (1) 'pure ministerial governments' (United Kingdom and Belgium); (2) 'pure collective governments' (Sweden); (3) 'mixed collective-ministerial governments'.

As Sir Ivor Jennings once remarked, 'the British Cabinet is not an "executive" instrument in the sense that it possesses any legal powers'.¹¹ When it has determined on a policy, it is carried out in the name of the appropriate minister or department. The consequence is that the cabinet (prime minister) is free to select the topics for its collective scrutiny. Sweden represents a totally opposite case: in that country the cabinet is constitutionally responsible for almost everything that is decided at the governmental level. The decision-making authority of individual ministers is minimal.

Paradoxically, these two extreme cases, based on indigenous traditions, approximate each other in practice. "Who decides on everything, decides on very little". The formal session of the Swedish cabinet is for the most part only a ritual, a decision-making machine, which handles in round figures 30 000 issues every year. Therefore, it is not interesting to know which matters are presented for formal ratification, but rather which are taken up for preliminary consideration in informal negotiations - which accordingly are equivalent to the meetings of the British cabinet. All other issues are resolved on the basis of responsibility on individual ministers, although an extensive briefing system provides a sort of veto right to interested colleagues.

Other West European countries take their place somewhere between these two types in so far as both the cabinet and the ministries appear as the legally acknowledged decision-makers. The internal variation among this group is admittedly large: in some cases (for example, Ireland and the Netherlands) we find only a broad regulation of matters - for example, legislation, high level appointments, or issues bearing on 'general government policy' or 'new policy schemes' - that always have to be discussed by the full cabinet; whereas in others (Austria and Finland) the law and the constitution prescribe a detailed list of those matters which must be decided by the whole Cabinet and also specify the areas of competence between different ministries. Finland and Sweden are probably outstanding examples

of an organization, in which the lines of authority between different public actors are drawn rigidly by law and decrees both vertically and horizontally.

The importance of formal differences should not be exaggerated. 'The crisis of overload' has created the situation that in all conditions the activities of modern cabinets are selective. True collective deliberation extends only to a small part of the agenda, and the remaining issues are in reality resolved elsewhere, e.g., in ministries, in cabinet committees, in multilateral negotiations among a number of ministers, and so on. Factors and factor complexes such as enumerated in table 1 determine the selection process as well as the real power latitude inside the relevant issue area.

But even though the formal arrangement of decision-making should not be able to produce clearly distinctive types of cabinets, it is still reasonable to expect it to have an impact on the everyday decision-making mode. In one party governments and in coalitions dominated by one big party, the difference is not necessarily significant, but at least in coalitions formed by equal partners the legal necessity to bring many administrative issues to a collective arena tends to cause the lowering of the level of the effective agenda. In a setting where competing parties are jealously watching each other and where all participants are formally responsible for decisions made, even issues belonging to routine administration - for example, lower level appointments - get easily politicized and become the object of 'give and take' bargaining process between parties. The importance of routine administration and many middle level issues in day-to-day governmental processes is consequently emphasized, and a slow deliberative and incrementalist style of functioning becomes dominant.

3. GOVERNMENTAL AGENDA-BUILDING

Considered as a whole, governmental decision-making may be conceived rather as a rapid stream of myriads of issues through the cabinet system than as a set of static successive decision-making situations. In striving to reach its fountainheads we have to deal with the interesting phenomenon called agenda building.

There is a broad and a narrow definition of a government agenda. In a larger sense governmental agenda may be defined as that set of issues explicitly designed for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision-makers inside the whole governmental machinery.¹² In a narrower sense the agenda contains only issues which are subordinated to the effective decision-making of the collective cabinet. There is no clear line between these agenda levels, because on the one hand, the effectiveness of the collective treatment varies greatly, and because on the other hand the capacity of the cabinet to guide decisions taken at lower levels may be considerable, either in the form of general directions or anticipatory reactions. What can be seen in reality is hence rather a continuum and fluctuation from one type to another than a clear division into cabinet decision-making and ministerial decision-making.

Agenda-building is based on social problems which have become politicized by some means or another; matters of dispute between the parties in the electoral arena, or public issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental authority.¹³ Through various channels and gatekeepers some of these issues are introduced to the formal agenda of the government. Political parties of course play a major part in translating issues to agenda items. A majority party in government may be able to depend on its own platform, although in most cases it hardly can be directly transformed into government policy. A political party seeking large support easily identifies with problems that are salient to many segments of the populace, and the objectives are presented in general terms and with considerable ambiguity. The operationalization of the platform is an ongoing process through the whole period in office, perhaps to a large extent as responses to many situational factors.

In operational solutions government programmes or agreements, drawn up when a coalition is formed, must be treated as basic documents indicating the agenda-building process. There are varying views about the importance of government programmes, based on rational ex ante reflection. Jean Blondel's hypothesis is that at least in limited coalitions the government programme, which has been worked out carefully and often in considerable

detail, profoundly restricts the list of issues and excludes areas susceptible to conflictual behaviour to the degree that "the government is in some sense viewed as a body in charge of implementation of what has been decided during the process of cabinet formation".¹⁴ Gregory M. Luebbert for his part assumes that the number of decisive preferences is actually quite small, because not participating in government has high cost and because detailed policy schemes generate dissension inside the own party as well. In the effort to minimize disunity, party leaders will limit the decisive preferences not only to contested principles of direction, but also to those principles that are of the greatest concern to their party.¹⁵

I would think that the reality is somewhere between these two concepts. A review of nine Western European countries indicates that in six countries (Austria, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden) a new government always formulates a programme irrespective of its political complexion. In Britain the electoral manifesto of the winning party serves this purpose; In France the practice varies; and only in Spain is the promulgation of a programme proclamation not an established custom. The importance of the programme is emphasized by the fact that it is presented to parliament for discussion (in Britain as the Queen's Speech, in the Netherlands as a 'government statement'). Only in Finland the programme or agreement, which is presented for the minutes of the State Council, is an internal affair of the coalition.

In Figure 2 these countries have been placed in a two-dimensional space according to the structure of the government programme. The scope refers to the number of policy sectors covered in the document. The degree of specification of programmatic issues varies, but there is apparently a general tendency to resort to rather extensive government programmes or agreements.

Figure 2. THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES

	Vague and manifesto-like		SWE	AUS	
			UK		
Degree of		(UK)	(SWE)	NOR	
specificity	Somewhat specific		FRG	SPA	
	Detailed and specific		FIN	FRA	NET
		Narrow	Broad		
		Scope			

The latest trend has apparently been a shift from brief and narrow proclamations to large and specific agreements. An analysis of data from Finland indicates that with the beginning of the 1970s the programmes have been more and more adapted to the idea of national planning in the specification of their aims and means. On the other hand, the presentation of fundamental value goals has been almost totally abandoned. The technocratic tone in government programmes has been considerably strengthened.¹⁰

But it is still a valid generalization that the degree of concretization and specification of a programme decreases sharply when moving from lower to higher agenda levels. It is possible to negotiate detailed agreements on middle level recurrent issues - e.g. the next year's budget - but when large new issue areas are raised, only good purposes and goals are most probably recorded in the final document. The actual planning process and specification of means - which is the real source of disagreements - takes place later in the government. The programme of the first conservative-socialist coalition in Finland - formed in April 1987 - contained among other things one important new item for both of the partners: tax reform for Conservatives, reform of industrial relations for Social Democrats. With respect to the general goals they reached an agreement easily, but the following year was filled with heated discussions about specification of these goals as well as the proper means to achieve them.

At least in Finland, many more ex-ministers interviewed minimized than positively emphasized the importance of the

government programme. Even if very detailed and specific, it still is in coalition cabinets a sort of insurance policy, taken out just in case of bad times. Party leaders are well aware that the real settlement of the issues they are concerned with will take place later; by including many kinds of issues within the government agreement they seek tentative assurance of a voice in that settlement.¹⁷ Parts of the programmes tend to distort to pseudo-agendas, which reflect more the hopes of participants than real potentialities and are used to assuage the frustrations of constituency groups.

Furthermore, a cabinet agenda can never be fixed: new problems, goals, and solutions are introduced weekly and monthly during a policy process. When a new minister enters his office, he finds high stacks of unsigned documents, half-finished plans and undeveloped ideas, and officials, as well as various interest groups in the field present him every day with new demands and policy proposals. As a broad generalization, the effective agenda of most cabinets is filled, amidst the stress of overload and partly depending on chance, with middle level recurrent issues and new issues below "high policy" level. One thing leads to another, and initiatives and impulses coming from many sides are mixed together in the complicated preparation process. Everything considered, an extensive policy decision can be the net result of a decision-making process so complex and conflictual, that it is not at all apparent, whose interests and efforts have, in the final analysis, dictated the decision and what is the basic ideology of a new law.

Government programmes are in most cases the only documented description of the task area of a cabinet. A comparative analysis of them would offer - with the reservations presented above - a possibility of observing changes in political attitudes and the development of the overall position of governments in policy formulation and policy implementation. The cursory examination of data in Austria and Finland has shown the - not very surprising - result that in the first place economic, in the second place social and in the third place cultural problems dominated governmental goal-setting in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸ Exactly the same rank-ordering was produced by a summary evaluation of their relative importance in Western European government programmes. Foreign policy and national defence were

only in the fourth place and, for example, environmental problems were mentioned only in passing as belonging to the most central issues.

These data undoubtedly reflect the objective structure of the social problem field, but to a certain extent the orientation of activities is also dependent on more situational and personal factors. There are phases when particular policy sectors are given priority because a particular prime minister is interested and appoints the right ministers; and there are large areas in which nothing appears to happen. Ministerial posts have a varying degree of attractiveness in the eyes of potential ministers. Evaluations depend largely on the possibilities different posts offer for visible and effective policy-making; but strong personalities find their way to highly regarded posts, and these very persons are able to make use of the potentialities.

The members of the research group were asked to assess ministerial posts in their own country in three ranking classes: high prestige posts, middle level posts and low prestige posts. The rankings were most identical in the first class: almost without exception the Foreign Minister and the Minister of Finance received the highest ranking, and the Minister of Justice as well as the minister responsible for economic policies were not far behind them. The central activity of most prime ministers shows itself in these same areas. The second ranking class in the scoring table was formed by the Ministry of the Interior, plus such major spending sectors as health and social security, culture and education, as well as commerce and industry. The least esteemed policy sectors are apparently communications and transport, agriculture (the only exception being Ireland), labour and environment. The appreciation of the Ministry of Defence varies insofar as it is in several larger countries regarded as one of the most important departments; in such countries as Finland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway, where national defence policy does not open possibilities for action, it remains rather uninteresting and hardly attractive.

The most important portfolios have a great appeal for all participants, but otherwise parties try to 'colonise' certain ministries in the sense that they repeatedly reserve specific policy areas under their control. This tendency is the more discernible the more interest-oriented political groups are.

Hence socialists in several countries have a preference for social affairs, employment, housing and welfare; Christian Democrats for education and culture; Conservatives and Liberals possibly for defence, justice and industry.

In 1987, the Finnish State Council handled in formal plenary sessions a total amount of 5 060 agenda items. A final decision was reached on 2 511 items, and the rest - about half of all the items considered - were presented as the cabinet's recommendations to the presidential session for final resolution. In the majority of these matters, the effective decision was dictated by the cabinet as well.

Four ministries with the highest number of agenda items - Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Health and Social Affairs and Ministry of Education - were responsible for 56 % of all cabinet business, four most passive - Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of the Environment - only for 11 %. The summary functional classification of state activities suggested by Richard Rose¹⁹ gives the following numerical distribution:

Defining state activities	2 536 items	50.1 %
Mobilization activities	1 108 "	21.9 %
Social activities	1 416 "	28.0 %
Total	5 060 "	100.0 %

A vertical analysis of these basic statistics, which measures the qualitative categories of cabinet agenda, reveals that 27.0 % of the items applied to parliamentary legislation and government decrees, 2.2 % to national planning and 'decisions in principle'. This information leads to the tentative conclusion, that of all the issues presented in official cabinet meetings, about one third applies to norm decisions and other policy decisions and two thirds to individualized administrative decisions. In the latter category, the personnel management and questions related to various government commissions were the largest single issue group (37.2 % of all items). But the Finnish government also decides on the founding of various educational

institutions, the granting of licenses to operate chemist's shops, and even the sanctioning minor deals in real estate on behalf of the state.

This kind of basic information about the governmental agenda is hardly accessible in most of the Western European countries, but even where it concerns Finland, it doesn't provide sufficient answers to the questions posed. The first place taken by the Foreign Ministry in the quantitative count does not mean that the cabinet would have been in 1987 especially concerned with foreign policy, and the dominant number of administrative decisions does not necessarily mean that the policy deliberation function would be lost in overwhelming routine. On the 17th of March in 1988 the cabinet decided that a large legislative package on industrial relations be given to Parliament for its consideration. The decision was reached in a summary fashion, without any discussion among the ministers. And still it was a major issue which had been under intensive preparation for one year and which had generated heated debate, both inside and outside the cabinet, more than any other actual reform project. But the preparation and debate were performed in other arenas, primarily in ministerial committees and informal cabinet meetings, the working schedule of which is not open for public scrutiny.

4. POLICY-MAKING STYLE

In the first section of the paper a reference was made to the policy-making model formulated by Richardson, et al., which combines two variables, the cabinet's approach to social problem-solving, and the relationship between government and other actors in the policy process. Concerning the first variable, the government can take either an active and anticipatory attitude toward new issues rising to the government agenda, or then have a more reactive and adaptive approach. It is also possible to speak of a more incrementalist and a more rationalist approach to problem-solving. On the other hand, a government may be willing to 'deal' with organized interests in society, to be accommodating and concerned to reach a consensus with interest groups; or it can be inclined towards being an

authoritative power, towards imposing decisions notwithstanding opposition from other actors. Such an examination proceeds accordingly outside the confines of government machinery to evaluate the social consequences of everything that happens in the cabinet system.

Figure 3. POLICY STYLES AND ROLES OF GOVERNMENTS

	Active problem-solving	Reactive problem-solving
Negotiation relationship	Policy coordination	Policy ratification
Imposition relationship	Policy direction	Policy adoption

Provided that a detailed empirical analysis were possible, the different policy styles could then be compared between political systems, government types, policy sectors and varying situations.

Locating Western European countries as such in different quadrants of Figure 3 would mean an excessive simplification of the empirical world, but in a loose sense it should be possible to speak of the dominant tendency in some national policy styles. On one hand, we can see the slow-moving, deliberative and consensual policy-making mode in the small Nordic countries. The characterization given by Olof Ruin about Sweden probably applies to all of them: 'In practice, this has meant that policy-makers, in their day-to-day political decision-making, should seek agreement among participants and avoid conflicts; should try to build large majorities for policies rather than force their standpoint on minorities; and compromise rather than cling rigidly to their own policy preferences. Furthermore, this has meant an emphasis on trying to direct events rather than letting events dictate policy. on being active and innovative rather than reactive.'²⁰ Policy-making is typically a gradual process of 'piecemeal social engineering'. Sweden is unique even in this area: the commission system in Sweden is even more open and consultative than in neighbouring countries, and Swedish

governments have followed a specifically anticipatory strategy in social problem solving.

In sharp contrast to this is presumably the traditional imposition style of the French government policy, which, it is true, has two faces: it may appear in a routine, bureaucratic style of decision-making ('immobilisme'), or then in markedly innovative interventions, based on centralized planning, in order to modernise certain policy sectors or solve individual problems.

'The mode of domination' was an important explanatory factor in Heikki Paloheimo's study on the economic development of capitalist states in the 1970s. By combining two variables, the extent of state economic intervention and the impact of group corporatism in decision-making, he was able to distinguish between four modes of domination: (1) corporatist-interventionist (extensive intervention, strong corporatism), (2) interventionist (extensive intervention, weaker corporatism), (3) corporatist (less extensive regulation, strong corporatism), and (4) pluralist (less regulation, less pluralism). Among Western European countries, Sweden, Norway and Austria were identified as belonging to the first category; Belgium, the Netherlands, France, West Germany, Finland and Denmark to the second, Switzerland alone to the third, and Ireland, the United Kingdom and Italy to the fourth.²¹ Such a summary classification on a macro-level does not, it is true, sort out the decision-making modes of cabinets in any great detail.

In a concrete analysis it would probably be more interesting to explore differences in styles between different governments and policy sectors. C.H. Sisson once claimed that in Britain the cabinet, including the Prime Minister, are ill placed or badly equipped to wrench policy from its established direction. Centrally located are the officials, who are the Queen's servants and not the politician's; when ministers change 'they raise their eyebrows and continue as before, only noting that certain emphases must be changed'.²² The assessment is supposedly valid as far as most routine activities and recurrent middle level issues are concerned; but the cabinet can certainly have an influence on strategic aspects of a new policy by setting the agenda, scheduling the activities and giving directions as to the outlines of policy contents. It is reasonable to hypothesize that changes are less dramatic, when the political composition

of the cabinet remains roughly the same for long periods and when the prime minister is not a powerful task leader (e.g., Finland 1966-87); more apparent when a rigidly structured party system leads after periodic elections to changing cabinet compositions and to a more influential prime ministerial leadership. In this sense a comparison between for example, the Callaghan cabinet (1976-79) and the Thatcher cabinets (1979-87) in Great Britain or between the Brandt cabinet (1969-74) and the Schmidt cabinet (1974-82) on the one hand, and the Kohl cabinet (1982-87) on the other in West Germany could be revealing.

As far as different policy sectors are concerned, France and Finland belong in one respect to the same category: their divergent authoritative style in foreign and defence policy must be connected with the activity and leadership position of the head of state in these same issue areas. In both countries the president keeps a careful watch over the appointment of the Foreign minister and the Minister of Defence, who also may be looked upon very often as his personal trustees. But the important difference is that whereas French foreign policy has on many occasions been active and innovative in character, Finnish foreign policy has represented - at least after the mid-seventies (and defence policy has been traditionally so) a reactive/adaptive type of policy-making. Otherwise the impressionistic delineation of policy styles in Western European countries reinforces expectations, according to which social and health policy, as well as economic and finance policy are particularly susceptible to bargaining style and negotiation relationship between government and group actors.

It is conceivable that the same differences between policy sectors have been accentuated in the most recent development. To the degree that the innovative policies of the 1950s and 1960s were established, perhaps in a reduced amplitude, as normal public functions, the focus of activities moved in the direction of ministries and the trend toward forming autonomous and self-contained policy communities was strengthened. In a segmented system these communities have their own clientele relationships, preparation machinery and decision-making style.

Situational factors are connected here with the long-term trend of policy-making modes. It is reasonable to assume that the general governmental mode of functioning has moved in the space

presented by Figure 3 clockwise from one quadrant to another. The traditional bureaucratic 'policy adoption style' presupposes a low level of state activities, a low degree of organization, a considerable amount of political illiteracy, and a hierarchical structure of authority. In weekly consultations the cabinet ministers are informed of routine measures and they easily acquiesce to policies without many alternatives left open to them. With the growth of resources and expectations the government is activated, it relies on more rational preparation methods than before, and it resorts to stronger measures-regulative and distributive - in order to direct social and political developments. The importance of the cabinet in setting agendas and formulating policies is considerable, and final policy decisions are the result of a complex interplay between different levels of the cabinet system. The mobilization and organization of the citizenry forces the cabinet to open a multitude of negotiation and coordination relationships, and the proportion of consensus policy compared with imposition policy is growing when public activity is highly developed. Policy stagnation, caused by increasing welfare and/or weakening of the economic foundation, leads to segmentation, to closed negotiation relationships and to the weakening of the cabinet's role to ratification of decisions taken elsewhere. Conceivably, such a circuit was completed in several of the West European countries before the end of the 1970s.

The culmination of a political cycle in crises calling for new solutions opens alternative routes for the development. It is natural to close the circle and come back to imposition politics in a spirit of reactive problem solving - "it is extremely difficult to negotiate sacrifices". This is what actually has happened in several countries since the early 1980s. But searching for new solutions could also stimulate an anticipatory style of decision-making and the policy direction role of the cabinet; certain operations of Thatcher cabinets illustrate this tendency. Or then negotiation relationships may be preserved and even emphasized in a society characterized by strong corporatism. In a setting where a multitude of organized groups are increasingly protective of their interests, the environment becomes turbulent and decisions are taken more ad hoc in a troublesome bargaining process.

Perhaps this model is also applicable, divorced from total historical development, to individual policy sectors beginning at the stage when their central issues achieve political relevance and are elevated to the governmental agenda.

5. Conclusions

The fragmentary information thus far available is sufficient to demonstrate that Western European cabinets have for the most part a largely varying control over the governmental business, depending on differences in institutions, political constellation, the scope of government business and administrative culture. The collective cabinets of two small countries, Sweden and Finland, are making, even in today's circumstances, attempts to combine the political and the administrative level, from the determination of broad policy lines to day-to-day routines. They are not able to do all of this effectively, but the latitude of their formal competence at any rate provides an opportunity for a systematic selection of issues to be discussed and an extensive control of the administrative field. In multi party governments reciprocal rivalry and formal responsibility for decisions made may result in the politization of trivial matters and an excessive reliance on arbitration among parties.

At the other extreme the functioning of the British cabinet is determined by prime ministerial leadership. The head of the cabinet selects, perhaps partly at random, a small number of items to the agenda, and other questions of 'high policy value' are settled somewhere between the cabinet and the ministerial levels, in cabinet committees or discussions between ministers. In some other countries, for instance, in Austria, West Germany and the Netherlands, the traditional administrative orientation, professionalism, and autonomy of ministers put the cohesion of the cabinet on trial, and a plenary session might then resemble 'a loose board of managers' or 'joint sessions of cabinet committees'. The Spanish cabinet has been characterized as 'technical', the Italian cabinet as 'fragmented', the functional emblem of the Belgian cabinet is 'striving for consensus', and so on.²³

In the framework of their specific national character, cabinets develop varying profiles depending, among other things, on persons and political constellations as well as on the external situation. Still, the Finnish union leader Arvo Hautala, Minister of the Interior in a broad coalition in the 1970s, did not direct his criticism to his own cabinet, but to the government in general:

'What irritated me in the functioning of the cabinet was, that I did not see any methodical grip in it. The work drifted here and there, the departments were doing all kinds of things. That way a private firm would have gone bankrupt in one month or in one year at the latest. I don't pretend that the officials would not have been busy, but the management was accidental. Sufficient connections are lacking between different departments, not to talk about a joint planning system. The government programme may be in the process of preparation for a long time, and it is disputed to the amount that for outside people it seems to be the most important thing in the world; but it was not held in any value, not at least in the government where I was sitting...' ²⁴

Hautala adapted to an individual case the same criticism that has been directed to modern cabinets in general: they are managerially inefficient and they are too ad hoc, dominated by scattered and casual decision-making. A modern business leader would certainly accept this criticism; but a political cabinet is not a business firm but a political body, where the exigency for parliamentary responsiveness and responsibility take first priority and compel compromise over technical effectiveness.

The cabinet system was developed for the needs of a simple government in a bygone society, in which the level of mobilization was low and the number of problems suitable to be solved by political decisions was small; and it contained a rather primitive mechanism for the realization of democratic responsiveness: a possibility for a change of the leading group at any moment in a spirit of political amateurism. But the complexity in policy-making has since then enormously increased, and the stress connected with the governmental agenda itself has been intensified in the latest development, beginning from the 1970s on. It is sufficient to refer to three aspects presented in the discussion.²⁵ (1) The range of problems that government is

expected to deal with has vastly increased, and many issues (economic crisis, unemployment, nuclear power) have been difficult to solve. (2) The 'rhythm' of politics has speeded up; both domestic and international issues emerge very quickly and are also removed from the agenda quickly. (3) Openness in the making and implementing of policies has also increased, which has resulted in prolonged decision-making processes and has curtailed the effectiveness of negotiation systems.

"The crisis of overload and governability" has accordingly caused an essential change in the decision-making environment. In spite of this, the functions of governments are still habitually assessed on the basis of a traditional view, according to which the cabinet as a college of ministers is - or at least it is meant to be - an integrated policy formulating body. But it is always more and more difficult to isolate this body from the colossal machinery behind it. The parliamentary form has been adapted to the development by preserving the general political leadership in its original form as "the committee of the powerful", and at the same time by enlarging enormously the web of specialized leadership positions in the form of ministerial decision-making units. A modern government is a complex system, in which there is a gradual transition - through ministerial committees and working groups - from general to specialized political leadership and from there further on to the bureaucracy, which is the major resource of the political cabinet. This three-tail comet is tied by one branch to the civil service, by the other to parliament, and by the third to the party system.

In this system there is a perpetual interaction among different levels. The vast amount of government business, dominated by administrative routines and middle level issues of different fields, is handled at the level of specialized leadership; only a minimal part of it reaches the cabinet level. In most countries the plenary session is in fact no more intended to be a forum in which full ministers, sitting collectively, make all important decisions and formulate policy plans. "Cabinet is the forum for determining what cannot be settled elsewhere - in departments, by ministers, or by cabinet committees. It must arbitrate between ministers, make difficult policy decisions and allocate resources. It must act as a forum in which technical

advise is put under the political microscope... Cabinet is a forum that must be judged by political, not managerial criteria."²⁶

In this perspective the informal character of most European cabinets is an asset, because it flexibly provides the ministers with an opportunity to become involved in varying issues as the circumstances might demand, without moulding their activities into a constant pattern. It is conceivable that public policies in different 'new' issue areas develop in stages or cycles: introduction, incremental expansion, stabilization, and reformulation.²⁷ The intensity of cabinet involvement varies in different parts of the cycle: it is obviously most effective in introductory stages and initial expansion and decreases after that sharply as the new function is stabilized. In this way the substantial focal points in cabinet decision-making may shift along in time from one area to another, and the total intensity of its action may also vary according to actual needs.

Even if the role of the cabinet were limited to this, its impact on the formulation of public policies is not to be underrated. It does not define the governmental agenda, but it is able, if willing, to set preferences and raise major issues to serious discussion. It decides on some items; it steers the preparation and settlement of a host of others by formulating general directions; probably more often it integrates, coordinates, arbitrates and legitimises, and occasionally also reverses decisions made in the lower strata of the governmental system. The position of the cabinet plenary session has altered - but its status might be higher and its role more important than ever.

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